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Poetic Transcription with a Twist: supporting early career academics through liminal spaces

Fiona Smart and Daphne Loads

Expectations of early career academics are changing. In a complex, shifting environment with multiple and competing priorities, early career academics (ECAs) are required to take on responsibility for teaching, research, and administration at the same time as embarking on a range of less familiar activities including public engagement and marketing practices, adopting new technologies, and engaging with social media (see for example, Briggs, 2005; Lupton, 2014; Martinelli, Meyer, & von Tuunzelmann, 2008). The role of ECAs remains 'ill-defined and under-researched' but we know that they find it difficult to develop 'identity, agency and a sense of community' (Sutherland & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). Smart (2014) suggests that the transition from studying or working elsewhere into a post in higher education can be troublesome for ECAs with some individuals struggling to find their feet in the liminal space defined here as the 'betwixt and between' state that comes with moving from one role to another (La Shure, 2005). The state of liminality is not necessarily problematic: some individuals flourish in this transitional space (Bosetti, Kwailak, & Patterson, 2008). Whether it is possible to know in advance who will blossom in the liminal space and who might experience anxiety, confusion, and a sense of incompetence (Bosetti et al., 2008) is not the focus of this paper. Here instead we highlight an open-ended, artful approach which has the potential to complement more familiar developmental frameworks (for example the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework: Higher Education Academy, 2011).

Academic development work with ECAs is not confined to formal programmes. Development happens in the interplay between individuals and their environments in an entanglement of social networks, informal learning, and spontaneous encounters (Hoessler, Godden, & Hoessler, 2015). This suggests a diversity of possibilities in how academic developers might practise, acknowledging the importance of formal programmes, while valuing informal, serendipitous, and open-ended opportunities, in particular arts-enriched development activities that facilitate active engagement with collage, poetry, sculpture, and other art forms as a way of helping academics to think and feel deeply about their practices and identities (Loads & Collins, 2016). We understand poetic transcription with a twist to be one such option which has the potential to support individuals in a group setting (Smart, 2014). It is an approach which invites people to come together, to share stories of their experiences of academic life and to work with these stories in fresh ways. It creates a space where learning and development can emerge informally whilst employing a structured process. The apparent contradiction here will be explored later. The aim of this paper is to share the story so far, with the belief that the approach has potential to benefit others beyond our own practice.

Introducing poetic transcription with a twist

Poetic transcription with a twist is an approach devised by Smart (2014). Its uniqueness lies in the process by which each participant is invited to share in

advance a story drawn from their experience so that it can be re-told in poetic form by the author and other group members. To situate the approach we begin by exploring the practice of storytelling. Like Clark (2010, p. 3) we believe that storytelling is at the core of being human and can be a 'sense-making act', bringing coherence to the apparent chaos of everyday life. Storytelling pervades all aspects of our socio-cultural worlds, finding form in films, television programmes, myths, legend, history and tradition (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). To this list we would add music, current affairs, books and poetry. Storytelling is an activity which implies an audience, but as Clark (2010) points out, that audience may be solely comprised of the self. Reflection has become a 'buzzword' in higher education (Kreber, 2004, p. 29) where it tends to be understood as a solitary endeavour, which may limit its learning potential. Chapman (2004, p. 98) asserts that individual reflection, or 'critical personal narrative' is sufficient of itself because the primary purpose of critical personal narratives is to develop self-awareness (Chapman, 2004). Nevertheless, it seems that storytelling in a group context might be worth nurturing and exploring further. Elliott and Drake (1999, p. 2) identify a process called 'concentric storying' which involves the deliberate sharing of stories so as to enable personal growth and professional development, both for the author and the audience. Specifically they write about how stories told to others can 'facilitate new connections leading to changed practice' within the community who engage in the process (Elliott & Drake, 1999, p. 1). They explain concentric storying as a collaborative endeavour, dependent on trust, providing the opportunity of 'fresh ears' within the audience so that the teller might come to 're-author' their experience (Elliott & Drake, 1999, p. 3). A crucial aspect here is that the learning process extends beyond the individual author to embrace the listeners, providing the opportunity for new insights and altered perspectives for them too. Elliott and Drake (1999) speculate on the potential to adapt concentric storying to facilitate data analysis in a research context. By contrast, poetic transcription with a twist was developed by taking a method of working with interview transcripts and converting it into a collaborative group process (Smart, 2014). To provide context to this approach, a brief overview of poetic transcription is now offered.

Poetic transcription is a method of working with interview data that has been employed by amongst others, Glesne (1997). Also referred to as 'found poetry' (see Burdick, 2011), it is a process by which the words shared by research participants are re-told by the researcher. In order to do this, the researcher will have filtered the transcript with the intention of illuminating 'the wholeness and interconnections of thoughts, enabling the essence, hues and textures to be represented' (Glesne, 1997; cited in Smart, 2014, p. 68). Jones (2010) is one author who has embraced poetic transcription in the context of higher education. She quotes McBride (2009, p. 43) who argues for the power of poetry because:-

It questions, it leaves frayed edges and loose wires. It draws out the hidden, the spiritual, and the underlying rhythms of life that we swamp with information, noise and noise channels.

For Jones (2010), poetic transcription better enabled her understanding of teaching practice in its richness, subtlety, and passion. Like Glesne (1997), Jones (2010, p. 593) interviewed her participants, transcribing the data in full and then retelling an 'extended chunk of text', using only the participants' words. Jones (2010) was

committed to keeping the chronological order and logic of the original transcript. While both Glesne (1997) and Jones (2010) shared what they created with each participant, the process was not collaborative, and instead reflected the researcher's interpretation of 'meaning, emphasis, rhythm and nuance' of the participants' words (Jones, 2010, p. 593 in Smart, 2014). This has clear implications for the power dynamic between researcher and research participants. By chance, both of this paper's authors were at a seminar where Anna Jones presented her research. A possible application of poetic transcription took form in Smart's mind, primarily because she had been planning a session at a forthcoming academic induction day for new lecturers which was focused around critical incidents shared by attendees in advance of the day. Thinking about the critical incident she had been asked to use as the focus for her session, the question she posed to herself, and later to her co-facilitators was what would happen if all of the participants in the induction, including the facilitators, were given the critical incident to read and invited to work on their own to create a poetic version which they would then read aloud to the group? It was agreed that Smart would run with the idea, having created some 'rules' so that there was clarity for both participants and facilitators. Hence, 'poetic transcription with a twist' came to be, the twist being that unlike the research method described by Glesne (1997) and Jones (2010), in this developmental practice the originator of the story and their colleagues would be the 'poets.' Table 1 offers an overview of the process. Individuals attending two academic induction events and delegates at two conferences have affirmed the potential of the approach. However, while they recognised its possibilities, they had questions about its limitations. For example there was concern that its appeal would be limited to certain individuals and to some disciplines. It was at this point that the authors began to collaborate; both were curious to understand the potential and limitations of the approach.

Ethical approval was agreed for a small-scale study to take place at Napier University between February and September 2015. The study took the form of three face to face workshops in February, June, and September, alongside continual access to a secure blog site.

Five individuals agreed to participate: two nurses, one psychologist, one engineer and one language specialist. All were female. One individual, a male from a hospitality background had been keen to participate, but was unable to do so because of personal circumstances. The same was true of a second male from a science background. Together with the two facilitators, the study group therefore comprised seven females.

Experiencing poetic transcription with a twist

All three workshops took place at Edinburgh Napier University. The first two workshops spanned three hours and the final one two and a half hours. Table 2 indicates the focus and output for each workshop.

Emerging themes

The perspectives of the participants and the two facilitators illuminate how the approach was experienced. Data were gathered in the form of field notes documented at the workshops, the stories that were shared and the poetic forms that were created. Poetic transcription with a twist has the potential to enable the author of the original story to see things differently because, according to one participant, 'it offers an alternative lens' enabling a situation to be described 'from a different

perspective.’ As such, the approach might be seen as constructively disruptive, because it challenges the individual storyteller to re-engage with their account as they create their own poetic form and then listen to the poems created by their co-participants. Thus, it suggests that the opportunity for learning may take many shapes. For example, one participant spoke about realising that that she had taken the emotion out of the original piece of writing, but that the poetic forms shared by her co-participants ‘gave it back to her’ forcing her to re-think the event and her processing of it.

It allows for genuine understanding and empathy. It’s not black and white – it helps to develop in the grey areas which are the most complex.

Table 1. The ‘Rules’ of poetic transcription with a twist.

Working with the critical incident provided, you will be asked to work individually, so no talking/ sharing ... this comes

later

Step 1: Read the critical incident

Step 2: Re-read the critical incident, underlining key words/ phrases

Step 3: From the text of the critical incident, construct a poem, no rhyming required.

Don’t forget to give the poem a title

Note:

You can remove words to create your poem, but can’t add them

You must not alter the order of the words as they present in the critical incident

Think about how you use punctuation within your poem

Step 4: Using a flip chart sheet, present your poem ready for sharing

Step 5: Each of you will then read out the poem you’ve created. We won’t discuss any of the poems as we progress

through

Step 6: Discussion will focus on the experience of poetic transcription, for the group and for the author of the critical

incident

Time in total for Steps 1 – 4: 20 min

From one facilitator’s perspective, poetic transcription with a twist was experienced as ‘restorative, an antidote to narrow, technical “training” initiatives.’ The other facilitator described it as ‘a different place to start a conversation.’

After all of the poetic forms had been read back to the original storyteller (steps 5 and

6), conversations started, sometimes about the poems, but more commonly about the story itself. Curiously, this was rarely done to find out more about the situation; rather it seemed to be about staying a little longer with the person and their story, hence perhaps the experience of ‘understanding and empathy’ that was reported. Four interconnected sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data.

Silence and space

The physical space for the three workshops had seemed to be important, hence attention to providing tea, coffee, water, cakes, and flowers. However, while it was the case that the participants enjoyed these things that we brought into the room, the physical space did not feature in their reflections on the process. Instead, they paid attention to the social space created by the coming together of the group, a place where ‘the serendipitous, random and unpredictable’ could happen. It seemed to

matter that the group was not too big — six or seven was seen as ideal — and that the space was ‘bordered’, with time constraints clear and consistent and rules in place (see Table 1). In respect of the rules, one participant thought

‘it probably doesn’t matter what they are, just that they stay the same for everyone.’ It was the *consistency* of process that seemed to be key in its effectiveness. The space and its rules, including silence during the writing process were seen as helpful:

The time restriction and silence requirements [...] are helpful boundaries as it forces short bursts of focus. It also ensures that your thought process is not ‘polluted’ by the musings of others, so the finished transcription is a genuine representation of your gut feeling towards the scenario.

Table 2. Overviewing the study.

Work in advance	
of the workshop	Workshop activity
Post workshop activity in the blog	
Workshop 1 – attended by five participants & two facilitators	
Participants asked to share a critical incident in a Word document	
Three of the five critical incidents were worked with in turn; 21 poetic forms created	
All poetic forms created at the workshop uploaded to the blog	
Field notes taken focused on the experience of the method	
Limited participant activity on the blogsite	
Workshop 2 – attended by three participants and two facilitators	
Participants asked to share a critical incident in a Word document	
Individual completion of a written set of questions on initial thoughts about PTT , followed by a group discussion	
All poetic forms created at the workshop uploaded	

to the blog

Three of the five critical incidents were
worked with in turn; 21 poetic forms
created

Limited participant activity
on the blog site

Field notes taken focused on the experience
of the method

Workshop 3 – attended

by four participants
and two facilitators

Participants asked
to share their
thoughts and
feelings about
their experience
of PTT

Poetic forms were created using three of the four reflections received – 18 poetic
forms created

All poetic forms created at
the workshop uploaded
to the blog

Group reflection on the process in the
context of liminality and the method's
potential – captured in the form
of field notes

The facilitators had hoped that the secure blog site that they set up would provide an additional space for participants. However, the blog was little used, except as a repository for the stories and poetic forms created during the workshops. When asked about this in the final workshop, there was a consensus view that while technology dominates in contemporary higher education, poetic transcription with a twist was experienced as something different which did not fit easily in a virtual space. Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of the blog did not bring people together in the way which was valued so highly – the group being in the same room, at the same time, together, drinking tea, eating cake, and working on a task. This was expressed in one of the poetic forms created at the final workshop:

Collaboration

Collaboration featured strongly in the data, with one participant recording:

There is benefit in hearing/ reading/ transcribing the experience of others because we can learn from each other, we feel less isolated in our roles, sharing positive experiences is pleasant and fun, we can share success and also less favourable experiences. This means if we encounter something similar we might feel more equipped to deal with it. Whilst one participant felt the process 'nurtures respectful listening and empathy', another thought it needed to be 'out of your immediate team', to which a third group member added ideas about the potential for 'cohesion and vision' if the group was multi-disciplinary. It was also acknowledged that

collaboration during the process depended not only on skilful facilitation but also on a climate that was co-created so as to be, 'non-judgmental, appreciative and open to surprises'.

Practice

The value of collaboration was directly linked to everyday practice, something which one of the group acknowledged as being potentially lonely. One participant wrote about poetic transcription with a twist as giving 'so much back – either challenging or affirming my thoughts, both so useful for a continuation of my practice'. Key for this individual was the fact that in the workshops there was no 'driving of agenda', a comment which suggests that other opportunities which invite ECAs to come together may have explicit and/ or hidden agendas which detract from their potential.

Come Together, Right Now ...

I'm interested,
in those everyday transitions.
Together
Personal and professional growth
Development connected with big changes
Come together and see things differently,
To listen to what really matters.
Created together and open to so much
It is important space and time –
with the group together.

Another member of the group had a different take on the approach, seeing it as a way of 'helping [...] to engage [...] with their own experiences and practices'. The focus on individuality implied here is countered by a co-participant who wrote about the approach's value in enabling collective reflection on practice. However, of particular note in this subtheme, was the thinking of one individual who explained that the power of the approach lies in its focus – which was not on people, but on practice. She said:

The fact that we were 'working' on the texts which people had offered, rather than discussing them in depth meant that we really did focus on the situations rather than people, and I found this very appropriate.

Vulnerability and safety

Two common themes in conversations about poetic transcription with a twist are it's 'riskiness and the idea that it would only work with some individuals or in some disciplines'.

The process might provoke emotions in a way which invites risk. Such conversations were useful to us because they added another perspective to our thinking. However, we also knew that we had skills as facilitators and so we engaged with the approach, facilitating the workshops, understanding that emotions might come to the fore, as participants shared, wrote, and talked about the entanglement of social networks, informal learning, and spontaneous encounters to which Hoessler et al. (2015) referred. Feedback from one participant pinpointed the heart of the risk; she wrote:

The workshop was very emotional, as the 'work' which people put into the poems did also show that they were trying to understand the situations and reflect on new ways of dealing with them. Important of themselves, these words also seem to confirm the necessity of a framework for the process and, as such, endorse the very early decision to ensure firm 'rules' and clear expectations. A debate about the risks can be helpful, but more important is how the risk of vulnerability and the sense of safety were lived. So while we are unsure that the physical space we had set up – tea, coffee, water, cake and flowers – mattered, one participant who was unsure about coming to the first workshop, wrote about experiencing 'immediately a very warm and welcoming atmosphere'.

From a different angle, another participant mentioned the rules for maintaining the time order of the writing and keeping to the writer's words and their significance for her and the process:

The chronological rule can be frustrating but is essential ...The temptation to add words is one that must be resisted because you are then attempting to change the testimony of another to fit your own needs.

A co-participant echoed the importance of the rule concerned with not adding in, saying we

'can't be judged because it's the same words'.

Another suggests that the overall approach itself is protective because it

'stops the delving in, asking more',
a perspective enriched still further by committing to an approach which means 'we only have what we have to work with'.

We recognise the risks in inviting anyone to speak and/or write about difficult aspects of their practice, but believe that sensitive, enabling processes are far more conducive to individual and collective well-being than silence about those things that make practice difficult. It also seems important to create a space for sharing joys and successes.

In relation to the approach itself, we focus on the words of one of the participants who spoke about the poetic form she shared with the author of the experience as being 'some kind of offering'. Perhaps the concept of a 'gift' in contemporary university life is unfamiliar and to be viewed with suspicion (Kamvounias, McGrath-Champ, & Yip, 2009). The question as to whether poetic transcription with a twist is a gift or something else requires further reflection. This said, aside from one participant suggesting that it breaks 'the mundane' and offers 'a unique form of support', it seems that the approach offers a different way of reflecting. At particular points each of the group recognised that reflection was what the approach enabled, with one participant offering a depth of perspective:

I have found the process an extremely effective way to engage in reflection - gaining much more from it than I have ever done writing an essay style reflection following a recognised model such as Gibbs. Having chosen to be a mental health nurse and

subsequently a lecturer, I have been flooded with concept of being a 'reflective practitioner' [...] When I was working in practice, the process of reflection was crucial in developing my skills as a nurse and more often than not was done in a group environment or one to one with a supervisor. It not only helped with my own development but added to the camaraderie and security of being part of [...] an open and transparent team. In a stark contrast, the reflection which has been insisted on since my transition into education has, I feel, become somewhat impersonal and dare I say a little bit pointless. [...] However, with Poetic Transcription with a Twist, the process of reflection suddenly becomes valuable again. It not only forces you to engage with your own experiences by placing you at the centre of them again, it often offers an entirely different perspective through the use of myriad alternative lenses, which can be really refreshing. It can also replicate your original feelings which gives a sense of validity and confidence, something that can be decidedly lacking when you are still negotiating your way into a new position. One of the poetic forms created in response to what this participant wrote in full (the above is an excerpt), captures its essence.

Meaningful Transcription

Engage in reflection with camaraderie and
Security

The process of reflection becomes valuable again
Engage with an entirely different perspective;
gives validity, confidence, a new position and the
opportunity to engage in a collaborative space
Innovative cohesion, shared experience and helpful
boundaries immerses the words in context
The key cornerstone is privilege
Intimate words is the essence of meaningful
transcription

Concluding thoughts

We began the study thinking that poetic transcription with a twist might be an option in supporting the learning and development of the ECA so that they might flourish, rather than flounder, in a liminal space. We still believe this to be the case, and would like to see it tried out in a range of different liminal spaces: for example with groups of university teachers who are encountering unfamiliar technologies or new course structures, or with experienced teachers who are moving into leadership roles. However, the words of one of the participants offer caution:

I think part of the charm of this approach is the novelty of it, so I'm not quite sure whether it would work on a large scale, or whether it would be better as a niche approach in certain circumstances.

Interestingly, the same person was able to succinctly capture what the approach is and what it offers:

Through other people's opinions (expressed in the poems) an insight to an incident is given. These poems enable the 'experienced' person to see the incident from a different perspective. The fact that only words from the incident are used gives the

opportunity to the experienced person to hear the other views without 'fear' of criticism.

We conclude that the approach adds to the entanglement of learning possibilities referred to by Hoessler et al. (2015). Yet, we see a risk that is less to do with it being novel or niche, or indeed concerning its capacity to invite engagement with emotion. We imagine that in an age where instrumental views of what lecturers should know, do, and value, and where metrics are likely to gain increased significance, there is a possibility that poetic transcription with a twist might be misappropriated as a 'managerial fix'. Imagine, for example, an ECA sharing their worries with their line manager who then prescribes a dose of poetic transcription with a twist to help them overcome problems with teaching, assessing or time management. We see it neither as a prescription nor a panacea to cure the ills that beset us in higher education. Additionally, we understand that it is unlikely to have universal appeal because human beings have preferences and the idea of poetry may not resonate for some. At this stage, we leave it with you, the reader to contemplate its potential in your own practice.

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